

THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS: A CENTURY OF RE-APPRAISAL

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THERE is a well known story of a gathering of children once addressed in the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh by D. L. Moody. In the course of his speech the famous evangelist happened to ask the rhetorical question, "What is prayer?"—and was somewhat taken aback when hundreds of hands shot up and hundreds of young voices recited in unison the words of the Shorter Catechism: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies." The incident may well stand, as Dr. A. C. Craig has written,¹ as symbol of the penetration of Scotland's soul by the work of the Reformers. But of course it also stands as a monument to a vanished world of thought and belief. The difference between that world and our own is (to use Dr. Craig's words) "the difference between snapshots of a city taken before and after a blitz: in the later one it is recognisably the same place as before, much standing secure as ever, if battered and scarred; but some buildings are precariously poised on ravaged bases and others in ruins. The main impression is one of confusion."²

If they accept the description—and they would seem to have little choice—the survivors of the onslaught on Westminster Calvinism are confronted by a fairly urgent problem. Will they complete the demolition process and abandon the standards altogether? Will they attempt painstakingly to rebuild on the old pattern? Or will they content themselves (as they have done during the last generation or two) with making the old ruins habitable, patching a roof here, shoring up a wall there? At a recent General Assembly certain suggestions were made in this connection by Dr. Nevile Davidson which perhaps merited closer attention than they actually received: in an age of resurgent Confessionalism we may expect, eventually, to hear more on the subject in any case. It is not the present writer's intention, however, to join either Dr. Craig in surveying ruins or Dr. Davidson in bulldozing them. What he proposes is, quite simply, to sketch the history of the Westminster standards—

¹ A. C. Craig: *Preaching in a Scientific Age*, p. 17

² *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20

particularly the Confession—in Scotland during the stormy years of the nineteenth century, to indicate the various and changing attitudes of Presbyterians towards them, and to leave the reader to draw his own conclusions, cynical, bellicose, sombre or gleeful as the case may be.

As it moved into the new century, the National Kirk, the church of John Erskine and Principal George Hill, of Andrew Thomson and the young Thomas Chalmers, was unambiguously—and it seems, contentedly—committed, by its own legislation and that of the State, to the Westminster faith. The commitment, it should be noted, had over the years become more and more explicit, far-reaching and (some might say) onerous. At the beginning of the process, away back in 1647, the General Assembly had simply recorded its approval of the Confession, “judging it to be most orthodox, and grounded upon the Word of God.”¹ Some two years later, the Estates followed suit: “having seriously considered the Larger and Shorter Catechisms and the Confession of Faith, with the Acts of approbation thereof presented unto them by the General Assembly,” they ratified and approved them and ordered their publication.² Then came the distresses of the Cromwellian occupation and the Stuart restoration; and when Presbyterianism returned to power in 1690 we find more and more use being made of the Confession, not just as a valuable affirmation of faith—in the words of the Act of Establishment in 1690, “as the public and avowed Confession of this Church, containing the sum and substance of the doctrine of the Reformed Churches”³—but as a touchstone of political reliability and as a means of excluding those considered ecclesiastically undesirable (i.e. Episcopalians) from all church office.

The stages in this process may be briefly indicated. In October, 1690, the restored General Assembly ordained that “For retaining soundness and unity of doctrine, it is judged necessary that all probationers licensed to preach, all entrants into the ministry, and all other ministers and elders received into communion with us in Church government, be obliged to subscribe their approbation of the Confession of Faith.”⁴ Parliament’s highly controversial Act for Settling the Peace and Quiet of the Church gave State backing to the use of the Confession as a test by requiring “that no person be admitted, or continued for hereafter, to be a minister or preacher within this Church, unless that he do also subscribe the Confession of Faith . . . declaring the same to be the confession of his

¹ *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1638-1842* (ed. T. Pitcairn), p. 158.

² *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland VI* (ii), p. 161.

³ *Ibid.*, IX, 133.

⁴ *Acts of the General Assembly*, p. 225.

faith, and that he owns the doctrine therein contained to be the true doctrine which he will constantly adhere to.”¹ Next year the Assembly followed this lead with a formula of adherence to the Confession, to be signed by “such of the late conforming ministers” as were desirous of reception into the Kirk;² and in 1700 it enacted “that *all* ministers and ruling elders belonging to this National Church subscribe the Confession of Faith as the confession of their faith, according to the Act of Assembly 1690 and the formula agreed upon in the Assembly held in the year 1694.”³ Subsequent legislation extended this requirement to further classes: to commissioners to the Assembly, for example (1704)⁴, and to licentiates (1705).⁵

But it was in 1711—a year of alarm and agitation—that the coping stones were placed upon this edifice of enforced conformity. Not content with the 1710 “Act for Preserving Purity of Doctrine” which forbade the uttering of “any opinions contrary to any head or article of the said Confession and Catechisms”⁶ the General Assembly now drew up certain questions, together with a formula of subscription, to be tendered to all its servants at licensing, ordination and induction.⁷ The second of the questions to be put to ministers at their ordination was as follows: “Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith (etc.) to be founded upon the Word of God; and do you acknowledge the same as the confession of your faith; and will you firmly and constantly adhere thereto, and, to the utmost of your power, assert, maintain and defend the same?” And the formula, to be subscribed by licentiates and ordained men alike, only clarified the extent of the commitment required: “I do hereby declare, that I do sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith to be the truths of God, and I do own the same as the confession of my faith which doctrine I am persuaded (is) founded upon the Word of God, and agreeable thereto. And I promise that, through the grace of God, I shall constantly and firmly adhere to the same, and to the utmost of my power shall in my station assert, maintain and defend the said doctrine And I promise that I shall follow no divisive course from the present establishment in this Church, renouncing all doctrines, tenets and opinions whatsoever, contrary to or inconsistent with the said doctrine

It is not difficult to trace a connection between the increasingly rigorous character of these terms of subscription and the mounting

¹ *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland* IX, p. 303.

² *Acts of the General Assembly*, p. 239.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 453-6.

political and religious tension in Scotland during Anne's reign, when the possibility of Union with England made many Presbyterians fearful for the Ark of the faith, and when events only confirmed their worst forebodings.¹ Yet—strangely enough—although the threat to the Revolution Settlement from Episcopalian and Jacobite gradually receded, the obligations concerning the Confession of Faith which had been imposed upon Scotsmen at the opening of the eighteenth century were still binding at its close.

On the whole, they were not resented. During Principal Robertson's supremacy, it is true, some efforts had been made (chiefly, it seems, through the pages of periodicals like the *Scots Magazine*) to get rid of clerical subscription; but the Moderate leader astutely discouraged all such proposals,² and the conservative reaction to the French Revolution soon made both the great parties in the Church more pronouncedly orthodox than ever before. Principal Hill of St. Andrews was the most eminent theological teacher of his age ("What Erskine's 'Institute' is to the Scotch lawyer, Hill's 'Lectures' are to the Scotch divine", wrote John Cunningham a generation or two later³); and if he is reported to have warned his students that Calvinism was not for use in the pulpit, nevertheless Chalmers himself was a grudging witness to the fact that his orthodoxy was "formed in conformity to the Standards."⁴ The same could no doubt have been said of the vast majority of Moderates. As for the Evangelicals, their devotion to the Standards was unimpeachable: it was, indeed, one of the most obvious of the enthusiasms which they carried into the Free Church, and helped to establish that body's early reputation for rigid—not to say immobile—orthodoxy in the first decades of its existence.

While it would be absurd to claim that there were no dissentients from the Confession in the years between William Carstares and George Hill it is therefore undeniable that they were few indeed. The Marrow-men's stress on the unlimited extent of the gospel call and on the free grace of God in the salvation of sinners might earn the condemnation of the General Assembly as an Antinomian modification of Predestinarian orthodoxy;⁵ McGill of Ayr might scandalise the orthodox of his generation by proposing to sign the formula of subscription with the letters E.E.—"errors excepted"—appended;⁶ and John Witherspoon may not have

¹ E.g., J. Cooper: *Confessions of Faith and Formulas of Subscription*, pp. 66-7.

² D. Stewart: *Account of the Life and Writings of William Robertson*, pp. 297-8.

³ J. Cunningham: *The Church History of Scotland* (2nd edn.) II, p. 435.

⁴ J. H. S. Burleigh: *A Church History of Scotland*, pp. 307-8.

⁵ Cf. especially the Act of May 20, 1720. *Acts of the General Assembly*, pp. 534-6.

⁶ Quoted in *Creed Revision in Scotland* (various authors, Glasgow, 1907).

been altogether wide of the mark when he declared, in his "Ecclesiastical Characteristics", that "It is a necessary part of the character of a Moderate man never to speak of the Confession of Faith but with a sneer; to give sly hints that he does not thoroughly believe it; and to make the word orthodoxy a term of contempt and reproach."¹ But on the whole conformity—sometimes reluctant, more often eager and whole-hearted—was the order of the day throughout that period.

Let us now examine the swiftly-developing onslaught upon the Westminster fortress which was launched by the men of succeeding generations: first upon the mere outworks (some relatively unimportant chapter or article in the Confession), then upon the inner defences (the characteristic doctrines of scholastic Calvinism), and ultimately upon the innermost bastion (the very idea of subscription to a detailed statement of faith as being essential to the continued existence of the Church in any recognisable and admissible form).

Surprisingly enough, it was among the Seceders—those staunch traditionalists—that the earliest significant change took place. While the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars convulsed Europe, the descendants of Ebenezer Erskine and Adam Gib also had a struggle on their hands, as "new light" dawned upon some of them concerning their relation to the ancient Covenants and to the view of the magistrate's function in religious matters embodied in these documents and in the Confession itself. Eventually, after prolonged and complicated manoeuvrings (whose complexity and interminability is almost too effectively conveyed to us in the pages of McKerrow's "History of the Secession Church"), the new attitude found expression in authoritative pronouncements by substantial majorities within both the General Associate and the Associate Synods.² The Burgher Synod, to which complaint had been made that to ask men to accept the Confession of Faith as it stood was to identify the Church with religious compulsion by the State, devised in 1797 the following preamble to its formula for admission: "That whereas some parts of the standard books of this Synod have been

¹ *Works of John Witherspoon* (Edinburgh 1805), VI, p. 162.

² Two generations later, in its 1846 Act anent Questions and Formula, the Free Church may be said to have worked out a not dissimilar solution. "The General Assembly, in passing this Act", it avowed, "think it right to declare that, while the Church firmly maintains the same scriptural principles as to the duties of nations and their rulers in reference to true religion and the Church of Christ, for which she has hitherto contended, she disclaims intolerant or persecuting principles, and does not regard her Confession of Faith, or any portion thereof, when fairly interpreted, as favouring intolerance or persecution, or consider that her office-bearers, by subscribing it, profess any principles inconsistent with liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment." (J. Cooper: *Confessions of Faith*, p. 91)

interpreted as favouring compulsory measures in religion, the Synod hereby declare that they do not require an approbation of any such principle from any candidate for licence or ordination."¹ Within a decade the Anti-Burghers followed suit, deftly employing one sub-chapter of the Confession to elucidate—or was it to amend?—the controversial chapter XXIII, "Of the Civil Magistrate". "They approve", so ran the declaration, "of no other means of bringing men into the Church, or retaining them in it, than such as are spiritual, or were used by the apostles and other ministers of the Word in the first ages of the Christian Church, persuasion not force, the power of the gospel not the sword of the civil magistrate, agreeably to that most certain and important doctrine laid down in the Confession itself, chapter XX section 2: 'God alone is the lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship; so that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience and reason also'."²

The far-reaching significance of these words is obvious, yet in a sense they mark the end of a dying order rather than the birth of a new. Very different is another pronouncement, made by the Anti-Burghers at this same time, which might well serve as the motto for all critics of the Standards during subsequent years: "As no human composure," testified the Synod, "however excellent and well expressed, can be supposed to contain a full and comprehensive view of divine truth; so, by this adherence, we are not precluded from embracing, upon due deliberation, any further light which may afterwards arise from the Word of God about any article of divine truth."³ The advance in thought represented by this portentous sentence was never subsequently abandoned: its appeal from the Confession to Scripture itself — an appeal which is, of course, reminiscent of certain oft-quoted words in the preface to the Scots Confession of 1560—lived on in the United Secession Church of 1820 and in the United Presbyterian Church of 1847, and the spirit which it embodied animated most of the worthier critics of the Westminster Standards throughout the Victorian Age in Scotland.

So far, no really determined attack had been made on any central tenet of the Confession, though its eternal validity had (by implication) been questioned and one of its peripheral chapters hedged round with fairly drastic qualifications. In the 1830's, however, some of its central

¹ J. McKerrow: *History of the Secession Church*, p. 591.

² D. Woodside: *The Soul of a Scottish Church*, p. 255.

³ J. McKerrow: *History of the Secession Church*, p. 443.

doctrines were—so it was alleged—called in question by two young ministers of the Church of Scotland, Edward Irving and John McLeod Campbell. Round these men of genius there has gathered so considerable a body of literature that the very briefest of comments should suffice here. The erratic Irving clashed with current interpretations of the Christological teaching of the Westminster Divines in his stress upon “the true, full and real humanity of the Man of Sorrows,”¹ and was deposed for what many theologians would today condemn as incautious statement of a truth rather than as grave heresy.² But his chief significance for our present purpose may be found in his tendency to detachment from all dogmatic formulations and in his declared preference for the Scots, as opposed to the Westminster Confession. According to Irving, “the Scots Confession was the banner of the Church in all her wrestlings and conflicts; the Westminster Confession but as the camp-colours which she hath used during her days of peace; the one for battle, the other for fair appearance and good order.”³ Being the man he was, Irving naturally preferred the document of battle to the document of order—but better presbyters than he have shared his preference right down to the present.⁴

McLeod Campbell, a much more considerable theologian, was condemned and deposed in 1831 for repudiating the limits imposed upon the Gospel offer by Westminster Calvinism and asserting the Universality of Redemption and the Assurance of Faith. To begin with, Campbell had maintained the compatibility of his new emphasis with the teaching of the Standards; but by the close of the trial he realised otherwise. “After the dreary night in the Assembly”, wrote his friend and fellow-sufferer A. J. Scott, “the dawn breaking on us as we returned, alike condemned, to our lodgings in the new town of Edinburgh, I turned round and looked on my companion’s face under the pale light and asked him: ‘Could you sign the Confession now?’ His answer was, ‘No; the Assembly was right. Our doctrine and the Confession are incompatible’.”⁵ With his departure, the attempt to construct a broader (if not truer) interpretation of the Atonement, its significance for all men and its appropriation by believers, was abandoned in the Church of Scotland,

¹ J. H. S. Burleigh: *A Church History of Scotland*, p. 331. (H. C. Whitley: *Blinded Eagle*, chapter 5 gives a vivid modern summary of the issues at stake in Irving’s trial before Annan Presbytery.)

² Cf. D. M. Baillie: *God was in Christ*, p. 16f.

³ Quoted in C. G. McCrie: *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland*, p. 20f. Cf. also Mrs. Oliphant: *Life of Edward Irving* (4th edn.), p. 337f.

⁴ Some notes on attitudes to the Scots Confession appear in G.D. Henderson (ed.) *The Scots Confession 1560* (new edn. 1960) p. 21f.

⁵ Quoted from Letters of Thomas Erskine I, p. 140 in C. G. McCrie: *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland*, p. 107f.

at least for some considerable time. The comments of two later rebels on the case may help towards a summing-up. First, Robert Lee of Greyfriars: "They (the Courts of the Church which dealt with Irving and Campbell) have been thought by many . . . to have repudiated utterly their Protestant character. They refused to permit the questions at issue to be argued and judged on the ground of Scripture, and insisted that they should be determined simply according to the Confession of Faith. But that Confession of Faith itself condemned and renounced the claim of any such authority . . . The Church of Scotland followed the example (of Rome, with its emphasis on tradition) which its founders repudiated."¹ Secondly, J. H. Leckie: "The defence of Campbell when on trial was not a strong one. It is worthy of study chiefly as showing the point from which a great man started on his theological pilgrimage, and also as embodying the first determined revolt against the Confessional theology."² But McLeod Campbell himself should have the last word: "When the Church says to both ministers and people, 'This is my Confession of Faith: if anything in it appear to you inconsistent with the Word of God, I am prepared to go with you to the Word of God to settle the matter', then does the Church speak according to her place. But if instead of this she says, 'This I have fixed to be the meaning of the Word of God and you cannot take any other meaning without being excluded from my communion; and to entitle me so to exclude you I do not need to prove to you that what you hold and teach is contrary to the Scriptures, it is quite enough that it is contrary to my Confession of Faith'; I say, if the Church of Christ use this language she no longer remembers her place as a Church."³

Similar issues were raised in the trials by the Secession Church of James Morison in 1841 and Professor John Brown in 1845. Both of them seem to have been chiefly concerned to stress the universality of the Gospel offer—even at the expense of the doctrine of Election as taught in the Confession—and so may be regarded as heralds of that liberalising process which had, for better or worse, transformed Scottish theology by 1900. But that is not their only significance. During the controversy of which they were the central figures, each used arguments which proved congenial to many of their successors. Morison contended that he agreed entirely with the main teaching of the Standards; that no man should be compelled to accept every detail; and that in any case the Bible was

¹ R. H. Story: *Life and Remains of Robert Lee, D.D.* II. p. 38.

² J. H. Leckie: *Fergus Ferguson, His Theology and Heresy Trial*, p. 18.

³ Speech to the Synod, quoted from Memorials of J. McLeod Campbell I p. 85, by J. Macintyre: *John McLeod Campbell—Heretic and Saint*, in Records of S.C.H.S. XIV pt. I, p. 60.

the supreme authority, not the Confession. Brown affirmed that, in spite of the younger man's errors, "there ought to be room in the United Secession Church for men who hold views similar to Mr. Morison's."¹ This last argument possibly had some effect, for although Morison was deposed Brown was acquitted; and at a later date the much more obstreperous Fergus Ferguson seems to have owed his being tolerated within the Church to its survival in many minds right down to 1878.

The first half of the century had not seen any great breach forced in the defences of Westminster Calvinism. Indeed the youthful Free Church could be looked on as a valuable reinforcement for the garrison. "Our Standards", declared one of its ministers, "are but an echo in human language of the infallible Word."² A Moderator of its Assembly in the 1860's called the Confession of Faith "simply a declaration of what is to be found in the Word."³ Professor Campbell Fraser in his "*Biographia Philosophica*" tells of how, when Isaac Taylor dared to use the "*North British Review*" as the platform for an attack on "superannuated logical or deductive theology," the formidable Principal William Cunningham replied by confidently asserting that the work of 16th and 17th century reformers—the men of Westminster undoubtedly included—"in its whole substance and leading features is far too firmly rooted in the Word of God, and has been far too conclusively established, to be ever again seriously endangered."⁴ And Cunningham's successor, Principal R. S. Candlish, in his work on "*The Fatherhood of God*" (1865) said of the Westminster Assembly: "I believe that its doctrinal decisions, on all the questions fairly before it, will stand the test of time, and ultimately command the assent of universal Christendom," and went on to refer to the Standards as "the only safe anchorage in any and in every storm."⁵ But a few ominous inroads had been made, the morale of the defenders showed some slight deterioration—and formidable enemy forces were massing for further attacks.

Before examining certain aspects of these attacks, let us remind ourselves briefly of the wider background of thought against which they took place, for Scotland was no longer (if it ever had been) an intellectual island, and powerful influences from England and the Continent were playing upon men's minds. Between the days of the Irving, McLeod Campbell and Morison trials in the 1830's and 1840's, and the Ferguson and Robertson Smith trials in the 1870's and 1880's, great—indeed,

¹ D. Woodside: *The Soul of a Scottish Church*, p. 266.

² Quoted in J. R. Fleming: *The Church of Scotland 1843-1929*, I. p. 222.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ A. Campbell Fraser: *Biographia Philosophica*, p. 161.

⁵ R. S. Candlish: *The Fatherhood of God* (2nd edn.), p. 289.

cataclysmic—changes had taken place in the mental climate in Britain. In his essay entitled “The Strands of Unbelief”, Mr. Noel Annan has provided an illuminating chronology of the advance of Victorian rationalism—in the 1840’s, the loss of faith by Froude and Clough and Francis Newman’s open attack on Christianity; in the 1850’s, Tennyson’s agonising in “In Memoriam”, George Eliot’s essays in the Westminster Review, and “Omar Khayyam”; in the 1860’s, Huxley debating with Bishop Wilberforce in Oxford Museum, “Essays and Reviews”, and Seeley’s “Ecce Homo”, denounced by Shaftebury as “the most pestilential book ever vomited from the jaws of Hell.” We may be sure that there were Scots—even Scottish ministers—who knew of all this: men who felt the force of the historical argument against belief, seeing Truth “no longer as absolute, philosophically static, revealed once for all, but as relative, genetic and evolutionary”; men only too likely to be impressed by the moral argument, finding (like Francis Newman) the doctrines of the Atonement, Predestination, Redemption by Grace and Eternal Punishment “horrifying and wicked”, and asserting (with J. S. Mill), “I will call no being good who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creatures.”¹ Add even a superficial acquaintance with Biblical Criticism, picked up in summer semesters at Leipzig, Berlin or Tübingen, or with Hegelianism as expounded by the Cairds in Glasgow or Oxford, and it is no surprise to learn that “in the ’70’s and early ’80’s both the U.P. and Free Churches” (and no doubt the Established Church also) “lost quite a number of able theological students who slipped quietly out of the theological halls, finding the traditional Weltanschauung too narrow for them.”² In November, 1862, Professor Robert Lee addressed his students on “the inadequacy of the theology of the 17th century to be the sole guide or authority for the 19th century”³: one may imagine that he had many willing hearers.

Scotland—as Principal Fairbairn noted in the Contemporary Review of December, 1872—was drifting further and further from the theology of the Westminster Divines. “The continuous earnest struggle of Scotch thought,” he wrote, “to escape from the harsher points of the Confessional theology has been nowhere without result. Years ago the Secession Synod stamped with its approval a double reference theory of the Atonement, which reduced their theology to a modified Calvinism such as the Westminster Divines detested and meant their Confession to condemn. That theory the United Presbyterian Church has never repudiated . . .

¹ Noel Annan: “*The Strands of Unbelief*” in *Studies in Social History*—a tribute to G. M. Trevelyan (ed. J. H. Plumb).

² D. Cairns: *An Autobiography* (with Memoirs by D. M. Baillie), p. 125.

³ R. H. Story: *Life and Remains of Robert Lee, D.D.*, II pp. 34-35.

The Free Church, long distinguished by its antagonism to eclectic theologies and double reference theories, has, though duly warned by certain of her own Doctors and Professors, repeatedly declared by great majorities that the modified Calvinism of the sister church was no bar to Union Within the Established Church a circle of men of broad and genial culture has been formed, whose beliefs, influenced by the higher criticism have not very much in common with the Westminster theology."¹ As illustrative of the changed theological climate of Scotland, Fairbairn referred to the clash between Principal Candlish and Professor Crawford over the former's lectures on the "Fatherhood of God". He pointed out that while Crawford's attitude was "essentially that of men so little Calvinistic as Pearson and Barrow"—Arminian, in fact—Candlish was still true to the tradition of Beza and Turretin and Rutherford; yet it was Crawford who had the wider appeal in the late 1860's. Why? He quoted as answer the remark of one member of the Free Church: "I went to the first lecture (by Candlish), but I went to no other; for I felt, sir, that that man was trying to deprive me and my fellow-men of all that was dearest to us in God."²

It is interesting to compare the attitudes to the Confession of two divinity students, uncle and nephew, one at the beginning of this period and one at the end. Old John Cairns is much more critical than we might expect in the notes which he made on the Confession just before his trials for licence. "The inconsistencies and cross-divisions, the reduplication of epithets, the casual arrangement of topics are exposed", says his biographer, "with bold and ruthless logic. The article on the internal evidence of Inspiration . . . is said to be 'very confusedly and imperfectly stated' The statement that God made the world out of nothing is 'very doubtful so far as my knowledge of geology goes.' The doctrine of the Eternal Procession is regarded as 'open to discussion', and the doctrine of the Infallible Assurance of faith is 'totally denied' But the notable thing is not his dissent but the directness with which he . . . falls back from its mixed metaphysics upon the statements contained in the Evangelical Articles. To the articles on Justification, Adoption, Sanctification, etc. . . . he 'assents cordially and without reserve,' and in the case of those from which he dissents his usual note is: 'dissent from this, but assent to doctrine as stated elsewhere in Confession'."³ In other words, the Confession is judged mainly by its own light, and in the student of 1845 approval far outweighs disapproval.

¹ A. M. Fairbairn: *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Scotch Theology*, in *The Contemporary Review*, December, 1872, p. 80.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 81-2.

³ A. R. MacEwen: *Life and Letters of John Cairns, DD., LL.D.*, pp. 213-3.

Very different is the case with the student of 1885. "I wanted to believe as my father believed," writes Principal David Cairns of himself at that time, "and wrestled with the old Calvinism and its solution of the world and human life. But it was in vain. It seemed to me to make God unjust, and something in me rose up in inextinguishable protest against it I was definitely away from Calvinism and fatalistic doctrine. I *hated* Charles Hodge, with his hard dogmatism."¹ What, then, came in the place of the old Confessional theology? An emphasis upon the love of God as the kernel of Christian faith, and a strong inclination to Universalism. "One day, by chance, I found in the library a little book which all at once opened my eyes to one simple, elementary fact whether I loved Him or believed in Him or not, God loved me"² And so finally: "I well remember one night when, in a solitary walk round by Craiglockart, Dreghorn Woods, and Hunter's Tryst, then deep in the country, I came to the rise of the hill on the old Fairmilehead road, where one saw the lights of Edinburgh in the distance, and I went right over to the final salvation of every human soul because it seemed to me that the 'glory of God' demanded it. 'He must reign till He has put all His enemies under His feet.'"³

If this was the attitude of students in the Scottish churches what is to be said of their teachers? It is interesting to discover that, whereas the rebels of the 1830's and 1840's were in the main young and comparatively unknown ministers, the rebels of the 1860's and 1870's were many of them church leaders and professors of international reputation: men like Dr. Norman McLeod, Principal Tulloch, Professor Lee, Professor Robertson Smith. In them, criticism of the Confession became respectable—almost. McLeod, as is well known, came into conflict with the traditional interpretation of the Faith through his unorthodox statements on Sabbath Observance. He escaped with an admonition from Glasgow Presbytery; and his own comments on the crises, recorded in his journal, cast much light on his attitude. "The politics of the one party," he wrote, "were to represent the past only, to lie at anchor as if the end of the voyage in history was reached, to accept the finding of the Westminster Assembly as perfect and incapable of improvement. The politics of the Church, as involved in this struggle, are, sail on, not back, to hold by the past, but to grow out of it Whether we could or can do this with a Confession which is part of the constitution of the country was and is the question." Referring to his examination by the Presbytery, he goes on: "I admitted that I had taught against the Confession of Faith but asserted that either all had done the same, or did not in every iota believe the

¹ D. Cairns: Autobiography, p. 85; pp. 87-8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Confession; therefore the question turned on whether I had so differed from the Confession as to necessitate deposition. I thus at the risk of my ecclesiastical life established the principle that *all* differences from the Confession . . . did not involve deposition . . . A great gain!"¹

The best indication of McLeod's success is that the succeeding General Assembly (1866) decided not to reopen the matter. But of course he did not stand alone. He had great allies. Principal Tulloch, for example, in an address entitled "Study of the Confession of Faith", suggested that it could only be correctly understood when considered historically as "the manifesto of a great religious party"² and continued: "The popular ecclesiastical notion of creeds and confessions, as in some sort absolute expressions of Christian truth, credenda, to be accepted very much as we accept the statements of Scripture itself, is a notion . . . which every theological student deserving the name has long since abandoned. Those creeds and confessions are neither more nor less than the intellectual ideas of great and good men assembled, for the most part, in synods and councils, all of which, as our Confession itself declares, 'may err, and many have erred'. They are stamped with the infirmities no less than with the nobleness of the men who made them."³ And of course the eminently bellicose Robert Lee was not slow to indicate his sympathy—he who, a year or two previously, had proclaimed (with obvious reference to the Confession): "The Christian Faith is that which a man must believe in order to be a Christian . . . and not every deduction which may be even legitimately drawn from that; much less the whole body of dogmas which controversial ingenuity, sectarian vehemence, party spirit and factious zeal may have piled up, mountains high, upon the one strong but simple foundation, Jesus Christ."⁴ Meanwhile, across the denominational frontier, Robertson Smith fought his own battle with the weapons of Biblical Criticism—contending that the Confession nowhere explicitly excluded his views (which was hardly surprising, as they had not been heard of when it was drawn up), and, by his eloquence and erudition, educating Scotland into a dynamic conception of divine revelation and a non-infallibilist conception of Biblical inspiration which might well have startled the Westminster Assembly.⁵

¹ D. Macleod: *Memoir of Norman Macleod, D.D.* (1882 edn.), p. 372f.

² Fairbairn in his already-quoted article made the same point, referring to the great men who did *not* help with the composition of the Confession—men like Milton, Hales, Whichcote, Cudworth, Chillingworth, More, Jeremy Taylor, Baxter, Thomas Fuller. (*The Contemporary Review*, 1872, pp. 73-5).

³ Mrs. Oliphant: *A Memoir of the Life of John Tulloch, D.D., LL.D.*, (3rd. edn.), pp. 222-3.

⁴ R. H. Story: *Life and Remains of Robert Lee, D.D.*, II p. 37.

⁵ Cf. especially P. Carnegie Simpson: *Life of Principal Rainy I*, p. 332f; II pp. 114-6

Where these men led the way, the Churches followed, and from approximately 1860 on to 1910 (or even 1921) there raged what might be called the great credal controversy. The observer of this prolonged debate as it was carried on in books and pamphlets and in the columns of the newspapers, in academic lectures, in private correspondence and in church courts, is sometimes inclined to believe that there were as many suggested solutions as participants. This is not entirely incorrect; yet it is possible to distinguish a few major groupings. First, the party whose watchword was "No change"; small, dedicated, formidable, concentrated in the Highlands and the Free Church, and destined to effect the Free Presbyterian secession of 1892 and the Free secession of 1900.¹ Then there were the advocates, few and extremist, of a new creed, with Dr. J. H. Leckie as their ablest spokesman (unless we are to include in the group Principal James Denney, with his one-sentence confession, "I believe in God through Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord and Saviour").² "It has never been the way of the Church," wrote Leckie, "to hold her peace in critical times of thought . . . The great modern movement . . . asks . . . a recognition and response. To this demand the Church will not return a long denial. She will seek to utter the Catholic Faith in present forms of thought. For this is her best tradition—not to doubt and be silent, but to believe and therefore speak."³

Still bolder spirits campaigned for a dispensing with any written and formal creed. "The modern revolt," wrote the future Professor E. F. Scott, "does not arise from any disloyalty to the Christian faith. We may claim, rather, that it means a reversion to the true idea of Christianity as we find it in the New Testament and in the teaching of Christ Himself. The truth must needs reveal itself differently to every honest seeker, and the Church can have no right to dictate to him what he is bound to believe. It can assist him in his seeking . . . But it oversteps its rights when it imposes its own formula."⁴ Some extremists, of whom the chief was the Rev. Fergus Ferguson, spent their energies in agitating for a total reconstruction of the Confession, which they frequently went out of their way to denounce in exceedingly violent language. In a speech to the U.P. Presbytery of Glasgow, which quickly involved him in one of the last great heresy trials of Scottish history (a trial from which he emerged almost unscathed), Ferguson declared: "Religion is the most living of all verities . . . Why then should it be doomed to wear the

¹ Their attitude is best revealed in the debates recorded in the various volumes of *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church*.

² J. Denney: *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 398; but whole final chapter is relevant.

³ *Creed Revision in Scotland* (various authors, Glasgow 1908), p. 59f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

shackles of a grim and ungainly past, and to grind forever in the prison-house of a gloomy and dead metaphysic?"¹ Other critics—Lee was on occasion among them—advocated drastic abbreviation, pointing out that various Protestant symbolic documents, the Scots Confession included, were considerably shorter than that of Westminster.²

The largest and most distinguished group of all gave their vote for revision: as its spokesman we may select, from many, James Moffatt and Robert Rainy. Early in this century, the young Moffatt brightly commented, "It is not that the Churches have outlived the Gospel, but that the Gospel has outlived the Creed," and he went on to declare that "the Church, as she is true to the authority of faith, is morally bound . . . to move in the direction of revision, cautiously and reverently, but none the less with spirit and sympathy."³ As for the great Principal, his Cunningham Lectures of 1873 on "The Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine" are marked by his customary weight, subtlety and astuteness. "The subject of this lecture," he observed in the last of the series, "has been treated under a strong sense of the practical necessity of creeds and confessions, combined with a strong impression of the danger to which the defence of them will be exposed, unless it is conducted with a resolute readiness to keep them in their place as human compositions, and to meet frankly every fair call to reconsider the form and measure which their authors have given to them . . . I should find it difficult to convey the importance which I attach . . . to a wise steadiness in refusing to vary the confessional expression . . . except for grave causes, and in the calmest and most deliberate manner. But . . . I am convinced that to familiarise our minds with the topic is the true way to diminish the dangers of it. To look upon it habitually as a task that may at any time become incumbent . . . in connection with the maintenance of the divine unchangeable faith—this is much more likely than the opposite habit to avert inconsiderable changes, and the instability from which they spring."⁴

Churchmen had spoken: at length, as is well known, the Churches acted. Declaratory Acts were passed by the supreme courts of the United

¹ J. H. Leckie: *Fergus Ferguson*, p. 109f.

² For example, J. S. Templeton: *A Layman's Mind on Creed and Church*, passim; also R. H. Story: *Life and Remains of Robert Lee, D.D.*, II pp. 172-4.

³ J. Moffatt, introductory essay to *Creed Revision in Scotland* (various authors), p. 6 and p. 9.

⁴ R. Rainy: *The Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 284f. Two interesting comments from America on revision proposals are to be found in *The Presbyterian Review*, October, 1889, pp. 529-89, where Philip Schaff argues for and John De Witt against. (Cf. also B. B. Warfield on *The New Creed of the Presbyterian Church of England*, *ibid.*, January, 1889, pp. 115-24).

Presbyterian Church in 1879¹ and the Free Church in 1892;² and the consent of Parliament made it possible for the Established Church to alter the formula of subscription for its ministers and elders in 1910.³ The Declaratory Acts clarified the Churches' relationship to the most distinctively Calvinist doctrines of the Confession by disowning certain extreme or erroneous inferences which had at one time or another been drawn from them and by setting alongside the limitation of effectual grace to the elect those other Scriptural truths which set forth the love of God to all mankind;⁴ the altered formula of 1910 gave a welcome liberty to tender consciences by requiring no more than acceptance of the Confession as the Church's Confession and a profession of belief in "the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained therein."⁵

These devisings are by no means perfect (two questions which spring to mind are: firstly, do the Declaratory Acts reconcile the irreconcilable? and secondly, what are the "fundamental doctrines" referred to?) But no significant advance has as yet been made upon them. The "Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual," 1921 and 1926, which paved the way for the Union of 1929, still refer to the Westminster Confession as "the principal subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland . . . containing the sum and substance of the faith of the Reformed Church," though claiming for the Church the right to modify it or even to frame a new doctrinal statement.⁶ And under the formula of 1929 ministers still profess to believe "the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church."⁷ Perhaps the Church of the 1960's should be content with this situation. Perhaps it should be uneasy and dissatisfied. Perhaps it may look to the recent theological revival and the ecumenical movement for an indication of possible lines of advance. The debate, in any case, continues.

¹ Text in J. R. Fleming: *The Church in Scotland, 1843-1929*, II p. 306f.

² Text, *Ibid.*, p. 307f.

³ "*Churches (Scotland) Act, 1905*". Text in J. Cooper: *Confessions*, p. 84f.

⁴ The language used here is based on certain phrases in a paper entitled *Recent Action by British Churches in Relation to the Westminster Confession of Faith* delivered by Principal Oswald Dykes to the 8th Council of the World Presbyterian Alliance (cf. *Proceedings, 1904*).

⁵ A. Muir: *John White*, p. 128.

⁶ Text in J. R. Fleming: *The Church in Scotland* II, pp. 310-312.

⁷ Text, *Ibid.*, pp. 319-321.